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## **Dr Jekyll and Mr H(i)de: the contrasting face of elites at interview<sup>1</sup>**

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### Abstract ;

Local elites distribute their knowledge very differently to foreign or local researchers. Paradoxically, foreigners are given more information as they easily generate confidence in local elites. However, foreign researchers are not really the best people to understand and use such information most effectively, because they are neither natives of the place and nor do they completely understand the local context. It seems that those who could best understand are given the least, and those who can understand the least are given the most. This has important methodological implications for researchers studying urban policy-making. First, when devising strategies for approaching and interviewing local political elites, they have to be fully aware of their own position. Second, gender factors matter, but it seems that it becomes secondary to other positional factors, like being a local or foreign researcher, or some institutional factors. Both factors tend to best explain the different range of behaviour of local elites

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The first thing that needs to be said is that, in the research I have conducted, studying local elites in themselves was not my primary concern. In my work, interviewing local elites has never been an aim in itself, but rather an unavoidable means of gaining a better understanding of the local economic development of the cities I had chosen to study. Issues concerning the renewal and redevelopment of former industrial centres became important in Europe during the last twenty years. I decided to study this in a comparative way, in both Scotland and France (Sabot, 1996). This led me to conduct over 200 interviews with local government and business elites in three cities: Glasgow and Motherwell in Scotland, and Saint-Etienne in France. In this article I shall only speak about my experiences in interviewing political and administrative local elites and not the business elites, because my aim here is to qualify the assertion of Hertz and Imber (1995) in their introduction that "politicians have everything to hide". To understand the different local contexts of these chosen cities, the different national contexts, and in particular, cross-national differences in local-national relations, I had to interview key politicians and senior civil servants. I then analysed their entrepreneurial strategies for renewal in terms of economic and marketing policies, in the same context, and influenced by the same literature, that Cochrane (1998) quoted in his introduction. Consequently, interviewing these local elites was not a goal in itself but a way to answer the research questions that interested me. Nevertheless, I soon realised, in the light of the parsimonious information I was given in my home city, Saint-Etienne, how crucial these interviews would be. They were often my only source of information, and my only means of knowing what had happened there recently.

Kvale (1996 p. 3) presents two contrasting metaphors of the interviewer as a Miner or Traveller. Whereas the miner interviewer "digs nuggets of data or meanings out of a subject's pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions," the Traveller interviewer "wanders along with the local inhabitants, asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world, and converses with them". I chose to adopt semistructured interviews with my elites consisting of a checklist of issues to be covered. This enabled me to stay close to the latter metaphor which "refers to a post-modern constructive understanding that involves a conversational approach to social research" (Kvale, 1996 p.5). With the kind of elites I was confronted with, and the nature of the topics I wanted to discuss, this phenomenological approach was more appropriate because of its openness and flexibility. This kind of

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'open-ended interview' (Schoenberger, 1991) enabled me, like Schoenberger with her businessmen, to understand the « interplay among strategy, history, and circumstances » (p. 184) as apparent in the local economic development strategy.

The local elites I met were those who had an influence, either by their action or their ideas, on local economic development policy. Richards (1996, p. 200-201) writes "by definition, elites are less accessible and are more conscious of their own importance" and furthermore "it is the interviewee who has the power", and so one then had to think carefully about which strategy to adopt. On that point, I share the view of Arthur (1987) that "the outsider's modesty encourages the insider's own amour propre". Without being so deferential, if I examine my behaviour during these interviews, I introduced myself in the manner of Spradley (1979, p. 34) where he explains: "I want to understand the world from your point of view. [...] I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher, and help me to understand." My objective was to meet most of the key influential elites in each city. However, to my cost, I soon discovered that in addition to "conventional elites" (Moyser and Wagstaff, 1987, p. 185) who "regard academic investigations as fruitful and valuable to society as a whole", there are also "defensive elites" or "counter elites" (also dubbed "threatened elites") who are "reluctant to co-operate". Even more surprising, it appeared that these two kinds of elites, Dr Jekyll and Mr H(i)de, could be the same person manifesting a different persona to either a foreign researcher or a local researcher.

## The experience

Although the aim of my research was not to point out to whom elites are more likely to tell the truth or show a friendly face to or not, I had to bow before the evidence. As a local (born in the city), or as a foreigner, I have not been welcomed with the same interest, and had to face up to two totally different attitudes. I was very struck by how warmly local government officials and business people in Scotland received me. This was in sharp contrast to my experience in my hometown of Saint-Etienne, in which I was denied access to information most of the time.

- On the one hand (the Scottish side, in Glasgow, and Motherwell), although my English was far from perfect at the beginning of my research, I had no real difficulties in getting interviews with local elites. I even succeeded in having interviews with some local government people who had previously refused to give interviews to a local PhD student who had, at that time, exactly the same status as myself. One staff member of a governmental organisation, upon realising how difficult it was for me to personally express my requests for interviews by phone, arranged appointments for me himself with some businesspeople with whom he had contacts. The general atmosphere during the interviews was rather relaxed and welcoming. People could not do enough to help my research. For example, it was not unusual to be given a lift back home after an interview in Motherwell, or to be picked up at the railway station when the interview location was difficult to find. I was also given an office in a local development agency for the duration of my research, in order to have easier access to restricted information.

The end result was that I was submerged by the huge amount of written information I was given. Like a vacuum cleaner, I sucked in everything, but had then a long process of selection, in order to extract what interested me.

- On the other hand (in Saint-Etienne), I learnt as Hunter says (1995, p. 153) to "never underestimate the elites' capacity for secrecy". There were some people who, after numerous phone calls and faxes, I gave up the idea of ever interviewing. For others, I was asked to supply a list of questions in advance. I was rarely given any written documents. Every time that I was aware of their existence, and asked for them, I always received a polite and friendly refusal saying the information was 'confidential' so I was not allowed to have it. Sometimes, their suspicion reached such an intensity, that it seemed that I should be the last one informed. On one occasion, I was informed that the requested information was secret and confidential, only to find the same information published in the local newspaper the following day.

The result of such secrecy was that the main sources of information I used for my research in Saint-Etienne were the city council newsletter and the local newspaper. While these sources can be very informative if you know how to read between the lines, sometimes I would have really liked to have corroborated what I read between the lines with a spoken discourse.

All of this resulted in, on the one side, I had to face an avalanche of information which required hours of sifting through, while on the other side, I had to desperately glean for snatches of information. The problem can be summarised thus: I did not receive the same amount and the same kind of information in the two countries, despite being the same person, interviewing the same kind of people.

As I expressed to a Saint-Etienne political councillor in charge of the economy, my French research was disappointing while

my Scottish research fulfilled one's expectations concerning written data. His response was, "Here we do things. We work, we do not have time to write any documents".

As I was complaining or expressing my satisfaction to other local researchers, in both countries, they all hastened to give me at once some reasons to explain this noticeable difference.

In Saint-Etienne, older local researchers, also from the department of Geography in Saint-Etienne University, explained that local governmental elites are very suspicious of everyone, especially researchers. Everything is top secret, and such behaviour is very specific to the city.

In Glasgow and Motherwell, explanations focused more on my personal characteristics, with comments to the effect that my French accent, coupled with the fact that I was a female, dressed in a French way, may have helped me a lot.

I could not be satisfied with such an explanation. It was too simple and too basic, although it cannot be denied that for those who heard me speaking English, I obviously have a French accent. As I am unable to change my French appearance or accent, I had no way of verifying the perceptions of my Scottish colleagues. However, I had the chance to meet an American male colleague a couple of years older than myself who was conducting similar fieldwork in Saint-Etienne. As a young lecturer in Political Science, he was conducting interviews with the same research questions, also with local elites. He had already performed interviews alone, with the same people that I had met. Asking almost the same questions, and sometimes just a few weeks before me, he was warmly received by the same elite group. One of the most striking facts is that he elicited quite a lot of information in the space of only a few weeks - much more than I had ever received in the many years of my research, although I was based in Saint-Etienne. People were far less reluctant to give frank and full responses when explaining the real facts to him, particularly about their tortuous relationships with the other local elite officials. In contrast, they kept pretending to me that they were all friends living in the best possible world-although I was not fooled. My American colleague was also given access to confidential documents. To illustrate the accuracy of this, let me detail a few but striking examples among hundreds. He was given appointments for interviews no later than the following week, whereas I had to wait longer - when I was lucky enough to have an appointment. He was even offered the opportunity of spending a whole day with the leader of the city, while he was on an election campaign, despite the fact that I was told he did not want to give any interviews, or meet anyone, for almost two months. My American colleague was also given photocopies of personal letters exchanged between local elites, along with "confidential" consultants' reports, which I was denied. In other words, the Saint-Etienne local elites' behaviour towards my American colleague was similar to that which I had experienced during my interviews with the Scottish local elites. Moreover, he was a male, with almost no American accent, but... he was also a foreigner.

Both bemused by this surprising difference and curious to examine it further, we were eager to continue our experiment, so my American colleague and I decided to go together to some of his interviews. We would speak jointly with people whom I had previously met, but mainly with those whom I had never met before, so that I could really notice the difference, if there was one.

Although we did not adopt a specific strategy with the people I had previously met, we adopted a very definite and particular one with the people I had never met before. We decided that I would adopt a low profile, and that, at the beginning of the interview, the colleague would only introduce himself, so that it might be taken to mean that I was some kind of assistant-taking notes but none the less asking questions. Some people, probably surprised about the interest I was showing by asking some precise questions, and also more suspicious, asked who I was at the end of the interview. I have never hidden my identity and, very naturally, I always explained that I was, like my American colleague, also an academic researcher<sup>2</sup>, but at the local university. I could read in some faces their feeling of having admitted a Trojan horse into their office... but it was too late for them to ask for the documents back and to erase the confidences given. Consequently, when my colleague and I knew of the existence of a very important document which we really wanted to obtain, we decided that he would go alone, because we realised that I could be a hindrance in obtaining the document. Indeed, whether I had previously met the person or not, whatever the point focused on, the fact of the matter was that with every kind of interview, and throughout the whole interview, there was a noticeable difference in everything.

The very first seconds of the interview were not comparable with those I conducted alone. The interviewees' glances and attitude were different: people had obviously mentally prepared themselves to welcome a foreigner, and so, to show the best side of their personality. They were more friendly, patient, and ready to give documents than they used to be with me. They opened every cupboard to satisfy my American colleague's wish. Instead of being deliberately ambiguous they now gave several examples to express clearly their point of view. No topic was taboo. There was no longer a question of confidentiality or secrets. He was given

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<sup>2</sup> In France, not every student, but some PhD students selected by a departmental committee, are allowed to give lectures at the University. This means that those chosen PhD students have a hybrid status: they are registered as students, but also as staff members of the university. They are considered as permanent employees, and receive a full wage, although the amount of lectures given is one third of the amount of a normal lecturer, and this status cannot last more than three years. In France, this particular PhD status is generally considered to be one of the best starts for a future lecturer completing their PhD. That is the reason I introduced myself as an academic, completing a PhD.

documents, in front of me, that had not even been mentioned during my own interview-let alone offered- less than a week before, although I was interested in and discussed the same topics.

However, I do not want to present a black and white picture. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that all the Saint Etienne elites were non co-operative towards me, and all the Glasgow elites helpful. Although this was not always the case, I generally found it was the overall pattern, and my concern was how such behaviour could be interpreted, and that the research problem should therefore be interpreted from another angle. My own experience in Glasgow and Saint-Etienne, coupled with my experience with the American colleague in Saint-Etienne, lead me to dismiss explanations of chance, coincidence, or other reasons given by local researchers, such as the renowned uncooperative nature of local elites in Saint-Etienne, my gender, and my French accent and appearance in Scotland. Given this reality, I needed to find a valid explanation, different from the hackneyed and weak arguments suggested to me previously, which I had not found convincing, and which had been disproved by the American colleague's experience. Indeed, these kinds of experiences -the differing responses of local elites, depending upon whether they are studied by foreign or local researchers - are quite disturbing for a social science researcher, and raise important methodological questions.

## Interpretations

In order to explain the outcome of either successful or unsuccessful fieldwork into why local elites behave as they do, throughout my research, I have tried to understand the reason behind my welcome by Scottish elites, compared with my previous interviews in France. In an attempt at analysis, I feel strongly that the key to this different behaviour from local elites towards the interviewer lies in **two interconnected factors**. The first one is the **institutional context**, such as the particular structure of French local government elites, who use their position as a stepping-stone to national politics and are thus very conscious of their image. The second one is a question of the **interviewer's status**: is (s)he a foreigner or a local researcher: in other words, are they « insiders » or « outsiders ». Each of these two factors will now be examined in more detail.

Within the last few years local elites have undergone substantial changes in both countries studied. I shall not account for these upheavals in detail, and shall instead confine myself to a short account, in order to present their possible knock-on effect on local elites' attitudes. Indeed, it would appear that part of the explanation we found has its roots in the repercussions of these changes.

Very briefly, starting from 1982, there has been a process of decentralisation in France. There were several changes in the national law whose aims were the redistribution of power into local areas, which sought to give more power and decision making to numerous elected local governments. France is governed by a four-tier government -in terms of territory of intervention. From the top hierarchy of government there is the national government, followed by the "Regions", the "Departements", and the cities. A fifth level, the cityregion, which is more powerful than the cities, is becoming more and more common. Each of these four tiers is elected by a universal direct vote. The system is totally different in Scotland where there used to be a two-tier system, after which a single-tier was introduced by the national government, without either the real consent of the local governments or the local population.

Besides, it has to be said that in France, being elected to local government can be a springboard for a future political career at a higher level of government, even to a national level, with a candidate becoming the equivalent of a Member of Parliament. In France it is rather uncommon for a member of the local elected elite to be a member of only one tier of government - that is perhaps why a proposal which prohibits the holding of multiple political mandates has existed for many years but has never reached a final step, and has consequently never been put in practice. It is not the way it works in the UK, where being locally elected is not the only starting point for a national political career, and where multiple political mandates are not the case. One impact of the French decentralisation for those who interact with the local elite is that, put simply, it has created little personal empires in which the locally elected elites consider local territory as their property (see Gremion and Muller, 1990).

One might reasonably suppose that this circumstance might explain the opposing attitudes of local elected elites towards a local researcher compared to a foreigner in the two countries I have studied. In France, local researchers could represent a threat, and seriously endanger one's re-election if they knew and understood too much of local affairs. Mistrust towards a local researcher then becomes the rule. The right behaviour to adopt is: firstly, if possible, try to postpone the appointment, hoping that (s)he will lose patience. Secondly, if the stubborn researcher insists on having an interview, receive him/her very politely, with all regard due to his/her position, but avoid giving any written documents (without speaking of confidential documents) which could be used in a distorted way, as academics are renowned for doing. Thirdly, be careful about what one says by adopting a stereotypical formal language; avoiding all the sensitive current events; cultivating ambiguity in order to confuse the mind of the researcher, and never complaining about anything or anyone, because every word spoken can boomerang back and cause serious damage.

Conversely, a foreign researcher is always an unexpected visitor, who always charms the local elites. The local politician will be proud to present his/her territory, and honoured by the presence of this foreigner who, moreover, seems so interested in his fiefdom! He should be treated as a friend who becomes an authorised ear to receive confidences. Such behaviour is totally understandable: it is always more impressive to receive a researcher from the United States, than from the local university. Why should local elected elites have any fear? The foreigners do not vote and will go back to their home country after the interview! And if he has been treated nicely, on returning to his native country, he will tell others how warmly he has been welcomed. This, in my opinion, explains the different local elites' attitudes that my American colleague and I experienced in Saint-Etienne. But what about my experience with elites in the Glasgow region?

Again, let us go back to the context of the local political system. The Thatcher government considerably reduced both the finance and power of local elected authorities, and instead transferred these responsibilities to quangos (quasi non governmental organisations). This policy has been applied especially in Scotland where the Poll Tax and rate capping were initiated. In 1991 Local Enterprise Companies (LEC's) were then created (the equivalent of Urban Development Corporations (UDC's) in England. I started my first interviews in 1992, when these local companies were just being created. It is essential to realise that they had, at that time, no real democratic legitimacy, as they are non-elected bodies. What is more, some of them have boundaries which did not previously exist as historically defined territories. The inescapable conclusion that emerges is that these quangos had to be recognised; they had to build their image of a competitive company in charge of local economic development. Like new-born babies they had to shout their existence to the world so they could be nothing other than delighted at being listened to by a foreign ear. And the fact that a foreign researcher came to meet them was especially flattering, because it heralded international recognition and projected their image abroad. They went out of their way for me because they could use me as a channel to promote their identity abroad

In the same way, local elites I met in the District Councils were quite frustrated with their loss of finance and consequent loss of power. They also wanted it to be known to the world how they found this unjust and unfair. The "yes" vote given recently to the devolution question in Scotland shows, officially, the existing and growing discontent of both locally elected bodies and the population as a whole towards a central government judged too intrusive and interventionist without concern for local opinion. No wonder then, that a foreign ear, which was moreover interested in their fate, and ready to listen to their complaints, was an appropriate recipient for their views. This, in my opinion, explains the local elites' prolix and helpful attitudes I experienced in the Glasgow region.

There are some other advantages to being a foreign researcher that I have to add to complete this argument. I have experienced them personally and also observed my American colleague using them. Being a foreigner allows the interviewer to ask questions very bluntly, in a way that a native could not without the risk of being perceived as too inquisitive and thus, intrusive. Much leeway is given to a foreigner, always excused by a non-mastery of a foreign language. For example, it is quite easy, being a foreigner, to say that an answer is not very clear, and then to repeat the same question if one thinks that the person is hiding something or trying to prevaricate.

Smith (1996) demonstrates the difficulty of researching in a foreign language and its implications for the research/translation process, insisting particularly on the « interpretation of meanings which relate to social contexts and situations... » (p. 162). In the same context, I have personally experienced that some words are taboo in one country but not in another. This is a matter of cultural differences, which any researcher preparing his/her fieldwork abroad should be aware of, in order not to embarrass the interviewees. Nonetheless, a lot of leeway is given to a foreign researcher when (s)he comes to the point of using taboo words when asking awkward questions. Indeed it is possible for a foreign researcher to break down a taboo. One particular example may be used to illustrate this. Speaking about "money" and "cost" is considered rather taboo in France. Consequently, in my particular field of interest questions like "how much did it cost?" to regenerate or build this or that were not easy to ask without having previously built up a good relationship with the interviewee, which I have almost never been able to do. Could this be due to a gender or an age factor ? (see McDonald, 1998, p.2141 and Cochrane, 1998, p. 2126). While acknowledging that my interviewees were mostly male and about 40-50 years old, and that I was 25 years old, I have to recognise that with female, or younger interviewees, relations were slightly different. However, they never supplied me with the same amount of information that my American colleague obtained with the same interviewees, though I had plenty of time to build a relationship with them, in comparison to his limited time in Saint-Etienne. Thus, I believe that I almost never succeeded in receiving any proper answer concerning costs from Saint-Etienne elites. In fact, I was once strongly advised not to enquire about costs. On the other hand, in the Glasgow region I did not even have to ask for this information: I was and still am systematically given the cost of every public or private spending<sup>3</sup> as soon as I show an interest in any specific project. In contrast, my American colleague, as a foreigner, rather easily broke through this French taboo. He used to ask with ease and

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<sup>3</sup> In Scotland, it seems that people are proud to announce how much they had to spend to recover from the recession, while in France, by contrast, it is regarded as shameful to spend public money, and in particular to disclose the amount, in time of crisis.

innocence for every cost, as discussing money and costs is culturally acceptable in the United States. He certainly encountered some reluctance to reveal the exact costs, but he was usually given an answer when the interviewee knew this information.

Moreover, the advantage of being a foreign researcher is not limited to the actual fieldwork itself, but it continues when it is time to publish the results of the research. I have been told by certain of the local elites in Saint-Etienne, that I should not write negative things about the city, because I should take into account the knock-on effect this could have on the image of the city. In addition to their civic pride argument, they added a much more insidious one: if, nevertheless, I were to do (did) it, I would have abused their trust. This reflects what Keith (1992, p. 554) expressed when stating that « there is an internal relation between researcher and researched in the production of power knowledge that makes all ethnographic writing, in part, an act of betrayal ». When I read what the American colleague wrote, I realised the freedom he had had to write so bluntly. Although we reached more or less the same conclusion, I think that I consciously or unconsciously, wrote in a more tactful way (although I have already had some reproaches). I have thus particularly experienced the "dilemma" encountered by Moyser and Wagstaff (1987, p. 190) with leaders in an urban community who presented themselves as "threatened elite". « Being neutral in the accepted, scholarly sense of the term inhibits and may even prevent the conduct of the research, but being neutral in the eyes of the respondent may involve a loss of objectivity in the eyes of the scientific community ».

### What lessons can we take from these experiences?

My experience confirms Hunter (1993, p. 36), "differences in the distribution of knowledge are a source of power, and power may be used to generate and maintain differences in the distribution of knowledge". Local elites distribute their knowledge very differently to foreign or local researchers. Paradoxically, foreigners are given more information as they easily generate confidence in local elites. However, foreign researchers are not really the best people to understand and use such information most effectively, because they are not natives of the place and do not understand completely the local context. So, in a nutshell, it seems that those who could best understand are given the least, and those who can understand the least are given the most!

This has important methodological implications for researchers who study urban policy-making.

First, when devising strategies for approaching and interviewing local political elites, they have to be fully aware of their own position. However, "positionality" covers multiple facets (see Madge, 1993, p. 296), so according to Rose (1997) being fully aware of her positionality is an almost impossible task.

Second, I do not want to dismiss the importance of the gender factor during interviews. It had, without any doubt, a certain influence. My American colleague was a male, and I am a female. Gender factors do matter (see McDonald, 1992a, 1992b, 1998) but it seems that it becomes secondary to other positional factors, like being a local researcher. In the context of this research, the latter, coupled with the institutional factor mentioned above, tends to best explain the different range of behaviour of local elites.

Finally, a foreigner is more likely to gain access more quickly to higher echelons, and to be given more sensitive information. S/he is also able to circumnavigate cultural taboos whereas the local researcher is tied by his/her own culture. In effect, the reception given to foreign researchers becomes a sort of public relations exercise at an international level; thus the foreigner researcher is allowed to ask almost anything. Conversely, a local researcher has to expend effort and time networking through the hierarchy and, even then, may not gain access to the crucial information influencing decision-making.

The ideal solution would be to organise joint research by a local and foreign researcher, but in practice this is seldom possible. I met my American colleague only by chance. Some interviewees made him aware that someone else from the local university was interested in the same topics, and was asking more or less the same questions. That is why he decided to "interview" me. My experience would tend to encourage academic funding that generates international collaborative research. Such research should not only lead to comparative studies, in which fieldwork is conducted by the local researcher and then pooled, but it should also include joint fieldwork carried out as a team. In my opinion, it would be fruitful for both partners and result in a better understanding of the local place and space.

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